

Interpreting Old Testament Prophecy*

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1 Common Pitfalls

- Understanding the writings of Old Testament prophets is difficult. This difficulty is largely due to the fact that the function of the prophetic office is misunderstood.
- Popular misunderstanding:

Prophecy = “Fortelling or prediction of what is to come”

Example: predictions about the Messiah

- Facts:

Messianic	< 2%
New Covenant	< 5%
Events yet to come	< 1%

Most of the time, prophets spoke of events in the immediate future of Judah, Israel, and the nations.

2 The Function of Prophecy

- The prophets were **covenant enforcement mediators**.
- Covenant enforcement:
 - God teaches His people to live out the covenantal relationship through obeying the Law.
 - Keeping the Law leads to blessings; disobedience leads to curses.
 - God enforces the Law.
- God announced the enforcement of the Law through His mouthpiece — the prophets.
 - The prophetic office is ordained, not volunteered.
 - Prophets are spokespersons: they don’t choose their messages.

*This tutorial is largely modeled after [1].

3 Exegetical Implications

1. *Prophetic messages are based on covenant stipulations. They are by nature unoriginal.*

- Reading prophecies helps us to understand how God interpreted His covenant and the Law in concrete historical contexts. It helps us to know the heart of our God.
- If we constantly see OT prophecies as predictions of the New Covenant, and busily look for confirmations in the New Testament, we will end up merely confirming what we already know. We thus fail to hear the message of God delivered through the prophets. Through such a reading, the Bible becomes tamed and domesticated, and ceases to be the living word of God.

2. *The key to understand OT prophecies is to understand their historical contexts.*

- Prophetic messages are God's response to covenant breaches in historical situations. To appreciate their full force, one must understand the historical background for which the messages were targeted.
- Problem: The historical context is not always obvious from the prophetic book.
 - Sometimes we hear about what a prophet did as well as what he said (e.g., Elijah). The historical context is usually explicitly given in such cases.
 - At other times, we are told what a prophet said but are not as certain about the circumstances under which he said it (e.g., Isaiah).
- We need external help:
 - Consult Kings and Chronicles.
 - * The background of Isaiah 1–39 can be found in 2 Kings 15–20 and 2 Chronicles 26–32.
 - Consult a good bible dictionary and/or commentary.

References

- [1] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. The prophets: Enforcing the covenant in Israel. In *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide To Understanding the Bible*, chapter 10, pages 165–186. Zondervan, 2nd edition, 1993.